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ABSTRACT

Supporting the constructivist view of language learning, a study by a teacher-researcher analyzed the thematic patterns in the writing of her 31 first-grade students for a period of 3 months. In the natural setting of the classroom the children were studied in the context of their own learning. Writing was collected daily, and stories were sorted and re-sorted into categories according to thematic content. Each child's daily thematic choice was recorded and changes and similarities noted. The effect of thematic patterns on writing development was then examined. Analysis of children's writing samples revealed a complex pattern of thematic choices congruent with each child's interests. Findings suggest that observing young writers and emergent writing behavior is helpful in gathering information on the processes of writing, learning, and constructing meaning. (Two tables of data are included; 21 references are attached, as well as one page of figure captions accompanying five student papers and a diagram of 10 themes in childrens' writing.) (NH)

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ED 364 890

Thematic Patterns in Children's Writing: Human Behavior Evoking Personal Meaning

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Running Head: THEMATIC PATTERNS

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Thematic Patterns in Children's Writing: Human Behavior Evoking Personal Meaning

A Constructivist View

The thematic choices made by my class of first grade writers as reported here in this article provides an illustration of the constructivist view of language learning which assumes that: (1) human behavior must be understood as purposive and aimed toward an end; (2) human beings are knowing beings with a set of prior experiences affecting their knowledge; and (3) the human species has a highly developed capacity for attending to the meanings of complexities rather than simplistic surface elements (Magoon, 1977).

An analysis of the thematic patterns of the children's writing in my classroom supports the idea that each child is in the process of reconstructing personal meaning through writing. This idea is not new; many educationists support this view (Britton, 1970; Emig, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978; Applebee, 1978). Janet Emig's remark that "writing is the making of meaning for the writer" reflects the Kantian assumption that we come to know our world by actively constructing it rather than by passively taking it in (Emig, 1983,

p. 133). Roger Shuy (1978) and Frank Smith (1982) contend that the emphasis in language learning is on meaning and that form follows function. Marie M. Clay (1975) refers to the complex behavior of children learning language:

> As the child learns to write, there is a rich intermingling of language learning across levels which probably accounts in some ways for the fast progress which the best children can make. A simplification achieved by dealing firstly with letters, then with words, and finally with word groups may be easy for teachers to understand by children learn on all levels at once. (p. 19)

Thematic Patterns in First Grade Children's Writing

I studied my class of thirty-one first graders for a period of three months. Every effort was made to study the children naturally in the context of their own learning. I listened to their conversations, their monologues, and their questions. I was not only an observant bystander, but also an active participant as well. The children had been accustomed to writing each day; they felt comfortable with inventing their own spellings for words as they wrote. The classroom

environment was conducive to self-expression and reflection.

The daily classroom routine and management techniques allowed the children time to play with language while sitting at tables in small groups of friends. Each morning the children wrote, listened, talked, and sang. The children knew that one of their responsibilities during the morning workshop was to write a story, a poem, or a song. The children were not given specific writing prompts or assignments. In fact, the children were never at a loss of words or ideas to communicate through writing. Given the freedom of thematic choice, the opportunity existed for children to learn to write and quest for personal meaning.

My purpose in analyzing the children's writing was to seek possible answers to the following questions:

1. What would the children choose to write about each day? What patterns might be observed?
2. What environmental factors would influence the thematic choices made by the children in their daily writing?
3. Would thematic patterns influence the children's writing development?

I collected each child's writing daily during the three-month period from January to March. I listened to the children's comments made to each other while in the process of writing. I photocopied some of the writings and saved some of the original samples in writing folders. I read and re-read each of their stories to get a sense of the whole. I began to sort and re-sort the stories into categories according to thematic content as they emerged. I listed each child's name and the themes that they most often wrote. I questioned the children about their thematic choices informally. I conferred with many of the children's parents during the three-month period asking them if they could speculate as to factors related to particular theme choices. I recorded each child's daily thematic choice and noted the changes and similarities. I looked for common underlying influences among my first graders' writing themes.

My daily analysis of the children's writing samples revealed a complex pattern of thematic choices congruent with each child's own personal meaning and personal interests. The thematic patterning was affected by a variety of influences (See Figure 1).

The thematic patterns in the children's writing also appeared to affect their writing development.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Possible Influences of Thematic Patterns

Literature. The influence of reading and literature on writing has been well documented (Britton, 1970; Bissex, 1980; Clay, 1982; Graves, 1983). Bissex (1980) writes that for her son, Paul, "writing and reading were related through their meanings to him as a person through their appeal to and development of his interests, his character, his style" (p. 197). Bissex documents specific book titles and types of books and the influence on Paul's writing. She describes Paul's fascination with joke and riddle books at one period and how he began to write jokes he'd read, create his own, and write humorous stories.

Britton (1970) states that "as the influence of the written language increases, their progress in writing depends more and more on the nature of the reading input" (p. 38). My investigation of my group of first graders' thematic choices also supports the dramatic effect of literature and reading on writing in

terms of content and form. One child in my class chose to write a series of stories patterned after a fairy tale form:

The Three Hunters

By Danny

Once upon a time there were three hunters. They only killed sheep and cows and pigs. They killed the sheep and the cows because you can make them into heavy jackets and the pig to ear. One day they were hunting and they saw a monster. The monster ate them. AAAAAAAAAAAAM!!!!!!!!!

The Flying Dragon

By Danny

One day I saw a dragon. It could fly. It was scary. It tried to get me but I ducked down and instead of killing me, it killed his teeth. Then he flew up and another dinosaur came and the dragon's teeth fell down like a bomb hitting Russia but instead of hitting Russia, it went around the dinosaur like a jail but make out of a dragon's teeth. The dragon flew down and gave me a big hug and then he ate me! AMAMAMAMAMAMPP!!

The Hungry Wolf Learns a Lesson

By Danny

One day I saw a wolf. He was hungry. It tried to get me but he missed me. He tried to get me so hard that his teeth fell out upon the grass. The wolf was crying so I said that should teach you a lesson and I went home to tell my Mom and Dad what has happened to the wolf.

Danny had been reading fairy tales at home and at school. He was apparently responding to literature in his attempts to invent his own fairy tales. Danny's stories provide similar evidence of Applebee's conclusion that children who have books read to them develop a sense of the convention of stories, formal beginnings and endings, central characters, plot and climax and even for the structures in particular types of stories like fairy tales (Applebee, 1978).

Sex Differences. Sex differences were found to be quite influential in terms of thematic choices in the children's writing. An analysis of these differences reveal "different voices" in boys and girls. The following table identifies the most frequently appearing topics:

Insert Table 1 about here

Themes chosen by girls reveal an emphasis on nature and feelings and reflect a connectedness to the environment and people. Topics chosen by boys emphasize aggression, extended space, and a separateness from the environment. Boys tended to use less "I" statements than girls. Similar observations of sex differences were eluded to by Pitcher and Prelinger (1963) as well as Donald Graves (1973).

The observations of sex differences in children's writing are congruent with Clark's research on young fluent readers (Clark, 1976). She observed that boys read books associated with their interests, while girls aimed at extending their reading of stories. The influence of reading and literature on writing is again noted in the girls' choices of stories and their writing of stories which center about their interests and action. The following children's stories may help illustrate the point.

The First Day of School: The Care Bears

By Kelly

This is Melinda. This is Melinda's first day at school. It looked like everyone in ignoring her. Melinda started to cry. "Hey, Melinda! We have the same shoes. Don't cry. I will play with you, okay?" "What is your name?" "My name is Remy. What is your name?" "My name is Melinda." You don't have to cry. Aren't you glad Remy asked you to play?" "What is you name again?" "My name is Good Luck Bear." "It is recess." "Have a good recess. Have fun with Remy!" And they went out to recess. Melinda and Remy played on the swing. When Melinda went to her desk, a boy came in. His name was Robbie. He asked for the boy's book. Melinda got back to her work. School was over. Remy asked Melinda's Mom if Melinda could come over. Melinda's Mom said she could come over.

The End

The Fire

By Dennis

One day there was a fire at a house. It was a big fire and fire trucks came to try to put out the fire. The fire got bigger and bigger and more fire trucks came and they all tried to put out the fire and the fire got bigger and bigger and bigger and more fire trucks came and they all tried to put out the fire. And the fire got bigger...

It is important to note that although sex differences were observed in the children's writing, these differences were not without exception. A few samples of writing revealed the tenuous nature of sex differences supporting the Jungian assumption that human beings possess both female and male dimensions simultaneously.

Feelings and Areas of Interest. These two influences in children's thematic patterns reflected the two modes of thought - expressive and cognitive. Many of my students' story themes were centered around the family, love, friendship, and self. Another example of writings centered about cognitive interests and questions about the physical world. Three brief examples of "Feeling" themes follow:

Love is special. I love my Mom. I love my sister. I love my sister because she is nice.

By Kelly

One day I saw a pig and everybody was making fun of him. So I brought him home.

By Rachel

I love my Mom and she loves me. We go every place together. I love it that way! Sometimes we go to the park. It is fun! I like it!

By Nicole

The next two sample writings illustrate the cognitive interests of the two boys:

Starfish in the Sea

Starfish don't have any legs. The starfish have arms. Starfish have feet. It doesn't have toes.

By Jonny

What Makes Volcanoes?

What makes volcanoes? In the middle of the earth there is hot material. It is magma. It goes up and makes a little crack in the earth. And it makes a hole in the earth. It goes up and bubbles out or it bursts out violently.

By Mike

Teacher. I was an influence in the thematic patterns of the children's writing not only as a subject for writing itself, but as an aid to the composition process. I knew the children very well. I knew their interests, their families, and their developmental needs. On those rare occasions when a child was having difficulty deciding what to write about, I talked with the child about previous experiences or interests. I frequently appeared as the focusing theme in the children's writing. These two samples were written near the end of the three-month study:

> Mrs. DuCharme is my friend. I love her. I love here because that was my first teacher that never got mad. I want to see her some other time and I probably will some other time.
>
> By Amanda

> Mrs. DuCharme was my teacher. She was very nice. I love my teacher. She loves me. I like her a lot and she likes me. My new teacher will be just like Mrs. DuCharme I hope!!!
>
> By Stephanie

Art and Drawings. Vygotsky (1978) wrote about the importance of drawing to writing. Gardner (1982) also found that patterns in children's drawing were often intertwined influences in their writing. Gardner's studies revealed that for some children recurring themes in their drawing enabled them the opportunity to develop more detail and explore new combinations. One little boy in my class drew a series of drawings focused on vehicles. The drawing was always a vehicle of some sort complete with levers, gadgets, control panels, and fuel tanks. His story was usually one or two sentences describing the vehicle or the action taking place in the drawing (See Figure 2).

Insert Figure 2 about here

Another little girl in my class drew the exact same picture of a boat, a rainbow, and a hill of flowers for a period of thirty consecutive days. She dictated the following sentence to accompany her drawing for the first couple of weeks:

I like rainbows and boats and flowers.

Soon she began writing this exact sentence herself, copying it from a previously produced text. At the end of a month's time, she was writing her story by herself, although the text to accompany her picture read:

I like rainbows.

I like boats.

I like flowers.

Clearly, drawing for these two children in particular was a source of influence in their thematic choice.

Music/Songs/Poetry. The rhythmic patterns in musical poetic verse has long been recognized as delightful to children (Chukovsky, 1925; Opie and Opie, 1959). Chukovsky (1925) writes of the value of poetic nonsense to the child's development and views the child as a linguistic genius. The rhythmic patterns in music, songs, and poetry allow children the opportunity for playful word experiences. Several children were influenced by word play in their thematic choices. One six-year-old girl in the study wrote a series of word jingles:

Wear bonnets

Wear clothes

Wear April Fool's Day on your nose!

Five little stars
Sat down on Mars
Along came a moon
And sat down and sang a tune
And frightened the stars away!

The sky the sun, the sun the sky
They fly around the world
Like little birds in the sky.

The queen of tarts
Ran out of tarts
She ran to town
When she opened the door
The tarts ran across the floor!

There's nothing like looking on the floor
When you can open up the door
A little bit of stew
And a little bit of guacamole too
And a little bit of tomato stew.

Another six-year-old girl wrote:

Happy, happy, happy
Good day to you
Good day to you
I really love you
Happy good day to you!

By Lisa

Lisa's mother told me that Lisa had gone to her room to make a card for me. When she came out into the kitchen, she carried the card and began to sing it to her mother eager for her mother's response questioning whether I would like it. Of course, I was delighted with Lisa's card when I received it at school! I appreciated the card not only for the kind thought and admiration it expressed, but the researcher in me delighted in the example of a child's musical play with words.

Two first grade boys utilize their inventive linguistic genius:

The Hog Dogs

By Mike

Once there was a dog that looked like a hog.
I don't know why the dog looked like a hog.
And then I saw another dog that looked like
a hog!

The Poem

By Danny

One day in the month of May
I will see you, birthday!
But, you will see
I'm as smart as you can see.
You know I'm smart
So let it be history!!!

A few children chose to write the lyrics of favorite songs. One little boy wrote the words to Happy Birthday for his mother on her birthday (see Figure 3).

Insert Figure 3 about here

One little boy wrote a series of nursery rhymes from memory; after becoming acquainted with Where the Sidewalk Ends he began to write his favorite Shel Silverstein poems from memory.

Family. The children were influenced by their families; activities in the home were often concretized in writing at school. The extensive influence of the family on thematic patterns of children's writing is at once obvious and difficult to observe. Clearly evidence of the familial influence is observed in the

children's writing about family excursions and material possessions. More subtle familial influences such as the parents' own attitudes towards writing in general and the degree of acceptance and nurturance towards the child as a writer may affect not only children's writing themes but also writing development (Taylor, 1983). The two student samples that follow reveal the importance of the parent in the child's definition of self:

My Dad knows Judo.
My Dad can do the foot sweep.
My Dad can do a flip.
My Dad can flip me!

I love Mom. She is sweet.
She is the best. I love you.
Do you love me? I do. If
you love me so much, take me
with you.

This story was written in school after the child went on a family outing to the zoo:

One day I went to the zoo. We saw lots of animals and we went to see camels and horses. Then we ate lunch and after that we saw bears and the bear

waved and it was funny. And then we saw kangaroos. They hopped and hopped all the way back. Then we saw seals and I rode on one of them and I fell off of it.

Television. Children today watch a lot of television (Postman, 1982). Television programs can influence their themes in writing. Several children wrote about cartoon characters. One six-year-old boy wrote a story about bombing Libya the day after he heard the evening news broadcast a special report on the Libya bombing. The following story was written by a little girl, summarizing a recent episode of "Fairytale Theater" she had seen on cable television:

> The once was a boy that wasn't afraid of anything. His Dad told the church demon. The demon said, "He'll get over that stage. When I was his age all I wanted to think about was naked Greek statues. I'll give him a scare he'll never forget." So he took the job to ring the church bell at midnight. The demon dressed up as a ghost. He saw him but it didn't scare him. "You tell me who you are or else," I warned him.
>
> By Remy

Peer Interaction. The influence of peer interaction on thematic patterns in the children's writing was visible on a daily basis. The classroom environment allowed for the natural exchange of ideas amongst the children. The desk arrangement allowed four or five children to share their writing with each other. During the course of the study, themes seemed to appear, jump around the room for several days, and disappear. Sometimes the themes would reappear, sometimes not. One example of peer influence on writing was when a group of girls decided to write about rainbows and hearts. The same group of girls proceeded to write about rainbows and unicorns. Then they split up to write their own unique stories. Another example of peer interaction influencing writing themes occurred when a group of boys all began writing stories about war. When the boys were questioned as to why they were writing about war, one boy answered that he liked his friend's elaborate drawing of bombs and missiles; soon the whole group of boys wanted to draw wars. The boys' war stories continued for three days before they chose a different topic.

Frank Smith (1982) eluded to the importance of interaction in writing:

> One can test one's own ideas on others; one can hear, borrow, and steal the ideas of others; but beyond that, new ideas can be generated that did not exist in any of the participants' head before (p. 196).

Two of my students, Steven and Dennis, wrote stories together one day (See Figure 4). They both wrote separate stories although I observed that Steven had "stolen" Dennis' story. More importantly, the two boys worked well together and enjoyed the interaction.

Insert Figure 4 about here

The influences on children's thematic patterns are complex and interconnected forming the basis of the child's web of meaning. Glenda Bissex (1980) writes about the influences on her son's writing development:

> Though Paul was surrounded by many potential influences, he necessarily responded to only some of them. He was in control of his own learning, seeking out certain information and experiences, ignoring or avoiding others; and so, although he was not in control of his own environment, he acted upon it (p. 212).

Similar observations were made in the daily lives of the first grade children in my class. Each child actively constructed personal meaning and knowledge through writing.

The Significant Effect of Thematic Patterns on Writing Development

Writing development is idiosyncratic and varies greatly from one individual to the next. There are, however, observable trends within the rhythm of development. My first graders' daily writing revealed that thematic patterns had a significant effect on writing development. The writing samples of the six-year-olds revealed several trends noted in the following table (see Table 2).

Insert Table 2 about here

My beginning writers utilized drawing, talking, and writing as mutually reinforcing processes to achieve their self-initiated purposes. These emergent writers produced drawings, labels, and lists; some copied from their favorite storybooks. My more competent fluent writers wrote more conventional narratives of greater variety. All of the children's growth, however, seemed

to be guided by two principles: (1) repetition, and (2) sequential and directive order.

Repetition. Although I observed great variability amongst the individuals' growth in writing, each of the children were observed to use repetition as an avenue for further growth. Through repetition of graphic form, symbolic form, and thematic choice, the children displayed a sense of accomplishment and competence. Many children wrote about the same themes although they varied the compositions somewhat either by adding details in writing or altering their original story slightly.

Repetition also manifested itself as the children discovered that they could generate more writing from patterns. (See Figure 5)

Insert Figure 5 about here

Many of the children used repetitive phrases in their writing such as "This is a.... It is....". Often children began their writing with a labelling phrase followed by an expression of related attributes. One little girl filled an entire journal with sentences that began with the patterned phrase "I love my..."

One boy in particular created several books about machinery; each page labelled and described a machine. Occasionally a child used repetition of a single word to achieve a sense of accomplishment. I observed Daniel write about a pie that he had eaten. He wrote that it was "very very very very very very good." (In fact, Daniel's story included the word "very" twenty-six times. When I asked Daniel about this choice, he matter of factly remarked that he needed to fill up the front and back of his paper so he used the word "very" repeatedly to meet his goal.)

Sequential and directive order. The children in my class grew as writers. Their growth can be characterized as sequential and directive. Each child had been given the opportunity to initiate drawing and writing activities and purposes. They were allowed the flexibility to choose their topics upon which to write. As a result, each child's writing development was facilitated. Dated writing products filed in individual writing folders revealed a rhythm of development towards increased complexity of message, more conventional written language, and variety of themes. My more fluent writers varied the themes that they wrote more often than my emergent writers. A

fewof my fluent writers were observed to use less talking or voicing as they wrote. It appeared that with increased competence the children relied less on the intermingling of drawing, talking, and writing; they displayed behavior which is compatible with the orthogenetic principle (Werner & Kaplan, 1963). The children's growth reflected a gradual tendency towards increased differentiation of the symbolic processes.

Conclusions

Observing young writers and emergent writing behavior is helpful in gathering information on the child's processes of writing, learning, and constructing meaning. It is through the powerful process of writing that children, in fact all human beings, can learn more about themselves and the world around them.

Writing allows children to discover meaning, entertainment, or power in writing; writing becomes composing the self as well as composing written language. An analysis of thematic patterns in children's writing suggests the power of writing as just one road to becoming oneself.

When he was five and a half years old Paul wrote and posted this sign over his workbench desk: DO NAT DSTRB GNYS AT WRK. The GNYS (genius) at work is our human capacity for language. DO NAT DSTRB is a caution to observe how it works, for the logic by which we teach is not always the logic by which children learn (Bissex, 1980, p. 199).

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Table 1

Sex Differences in Thematic Choices: Ranked in Descending Order of Choice

Girls	Boys
Animals (usually ducks, rabbits, bears)	Animals (usually wild and ferocious)
Pets (dogs, cats)	Pets (dog, snake)
Friends and play	Sports (soccer, baseball, fishing, hunting)
Family	Vehicles (boats, dirt bikes, race cars, tanks)
"I"/Feelings	Monsters/Dragons/Gremlins
Holidays/Birthdays	Space
Unicorns	Army and war
Rainbows, Hearts	Volcanoes
Flowers, Butterflies and Nature	Sea life/Sharks
Teacher/School	Famous People
Poems/Rhymes	Zoo animals/Forest animals
Fairy Tales	School/Friends
Real life situations and experiences	Family/Feelings

Table 2

Emergent Writing Behavior: Developmental Trends

Beginning Writing	Fluent Writing
Drawing	Narratives
Labelling	Fantasy/Fairy Tales
Copying	Non-fiction
Experiential writing	Descriptive
	Expository
Thematic Pattern Development	
Repetitions of drawings and themes	Variety in themes

Figure Captions

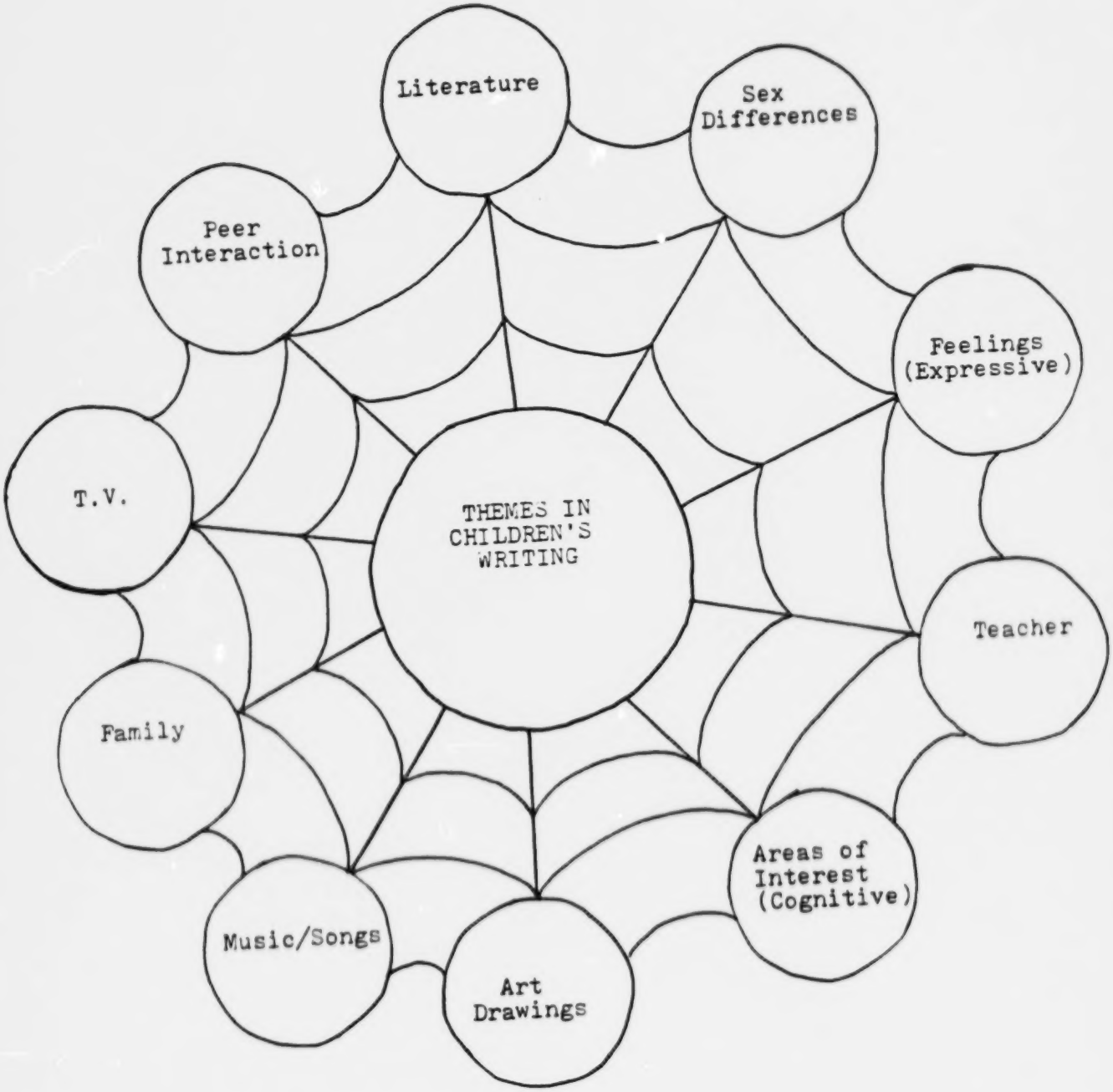
Figure 1. Possible influences of thematic patterns in children's writing which suggest a "Web of meaning" for the writer: each child acting upon those environmental influences that were most important to his or her own unique personality, interests, and style.

Figure 2. The influence of drawing on writing is apparent in this child's writing sample. This little boy drew his detailed picture first and then wrote in the lower left-hand corner of his paper: "A toyr is on alrt Blascase sam man boe the loa" (A tower is on alert because some man broke the law).

Figure 3. Mike writes and sings as he writes Happy Birthday to his mom.

Figure 4. Peer interaction allows Steven to steal an idea for a story from Dennis. Both boys discuss words and spellings as they write.

Figure 5. Student writing sample illustrates the recurring and generating principles.

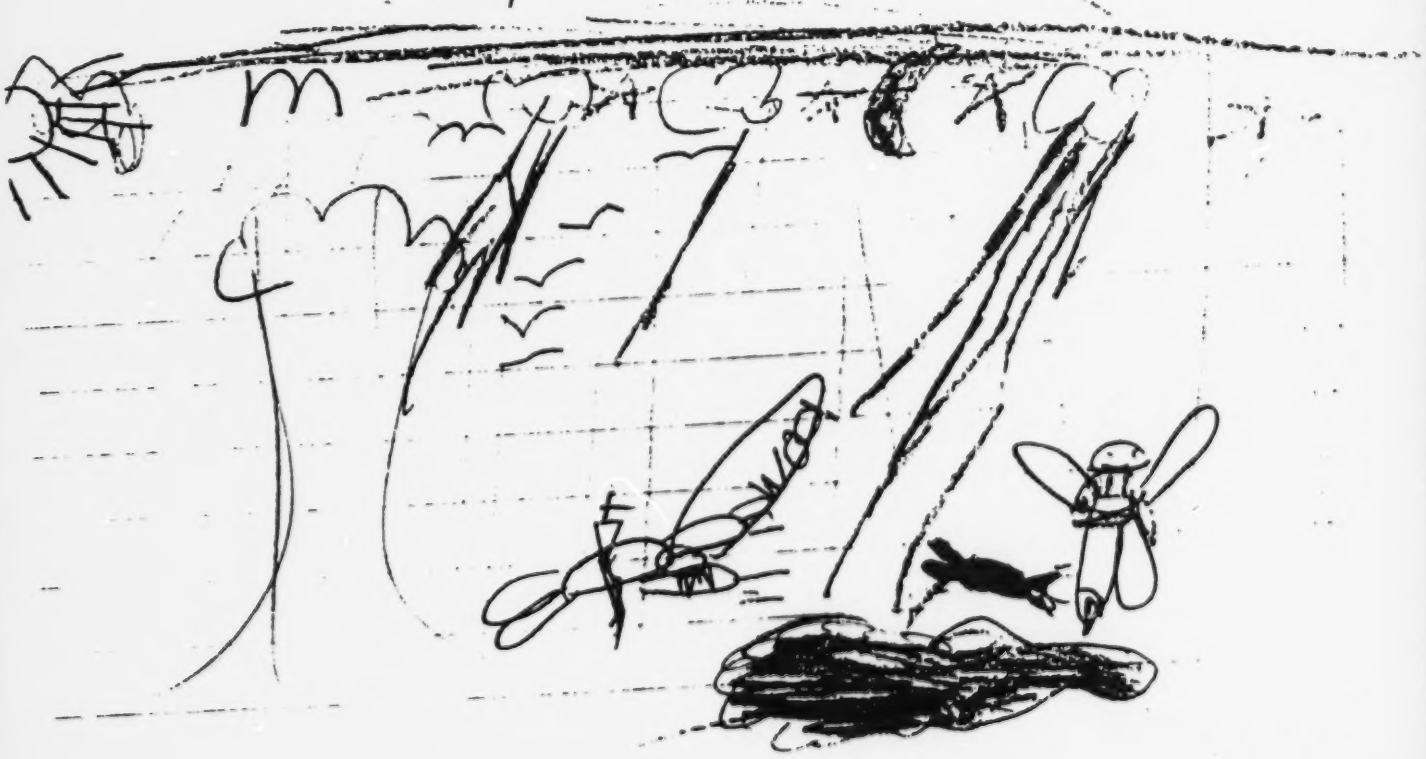

Literature
Sex Differences
Peer Interaction
Feelings (Expressive)
T.V.
THEMES IN CHILDREN'S WRITING
Teacher
Family
Areas of Interest (Cognitive)
Music/Songs
Art Drawings

A toy r is
on a rt
Place
s am man
Doc the
loa ll

Hapey Brthday to my Mom
Hapey Brthday to my Mom
Hapey Brthday to my
Mom !!!!

One day I went to the Junga. I went in the summer. my dad and me went one day I went for a walk I went to the lake. I saw a woff he was looking at me I ran back to my rent I got my amy shot on I got my nife. and went back to the lake. I saw the same woff. He tried to bite me so I took my nife out and stab him. Befor I killed him he bit me. the end

by Denis



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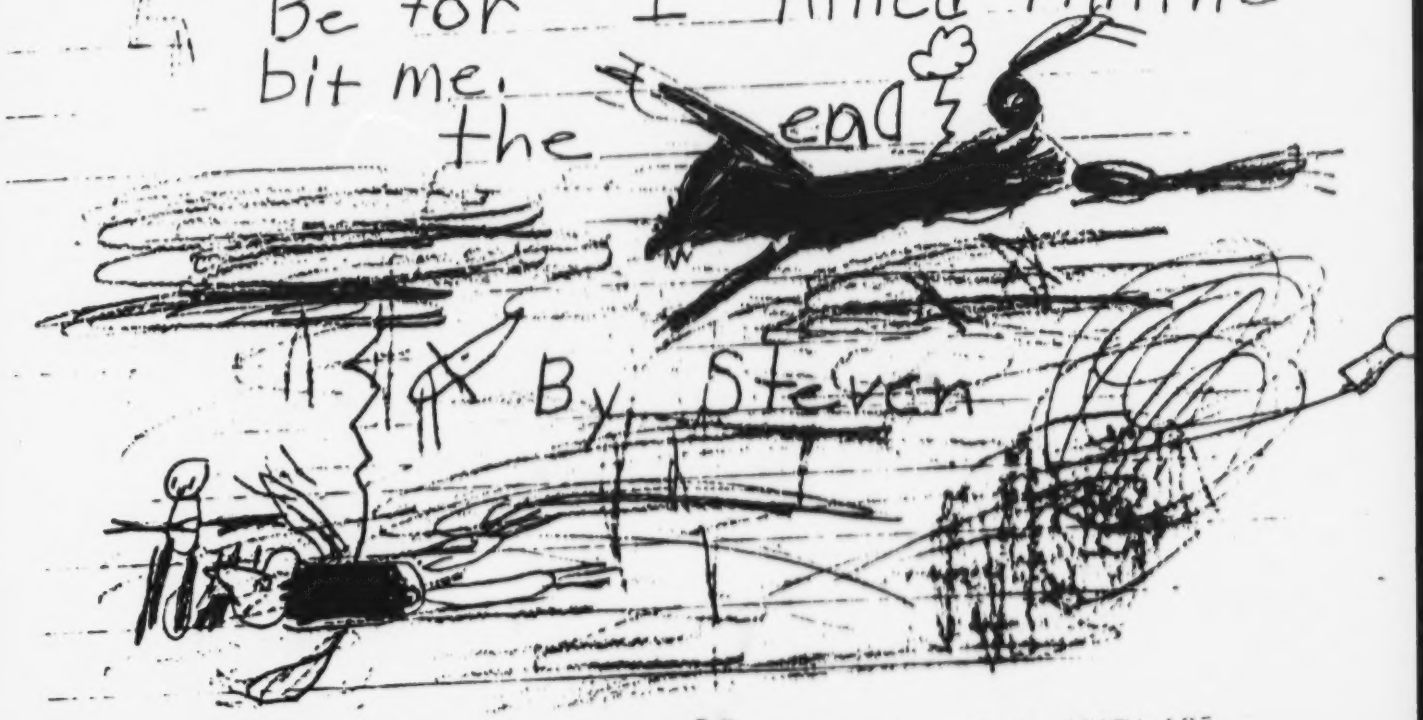
1

One day I went to the summer. Juncow. I went in the me went my dad and went one day I went for a walk I went to the lake I saw a wolf he was looking at me I ran back to my tent I got my army shot on I got my nife. And went back to the lake. I saw the same wolff. He tried to bite me so I tack my nife out and stab him. Be for I killed him he bit me. the end



By Steven

Ty James

My Bear

My bear Ty eight Jonathan P. up.
Then he eight Mrs. Du Charme upto,
Then he eight Brett up to, then he
eight Friday, up to. Then he eight
Mrs. Du Charme up to. Then he eight
Jonathan P. up to. Then he eight Toby up
Then he eight Kelley up to. Then he
ight Lance up to. Then he eight me to!